

The last cattle we had trouble penning were some imported from an outfit on the eastern edge of the shortgrass country. After two winters on the ranch, hard times and sacked goods tempered the spook in these old sisters. As is always the case, handling the cows quiet and easy going through gates changed their dispositions from escape artists to manageable black muleys.

The first year we used the feed wagon and chemistry to pen the cows. The '83 model truck tolls cattle better than the other vehicles. The exhaust pipe expels on the same side as the spout on the feed hopper. The motor burns oil — lots of oil. On a still morning, poking along at five miles an hour, the meal sifting from the spout fogs the fumes from the exhaust at the right height to intoxicate the lead cattle. Drunk on carbon monoxide fumes, they walk into the pen unaware of incarceration.

New age cattle's mothering instincts have diminished. The end of the screwworm scourge, I think, did more to change the mother cow's behavior than all the cow sense collected in Texas. In the days of doctoring every calf born in the spring all summer long, cowboys knew they'd better be quick catching a calf's hind leg on the ground, or the mother would be snuffing right on up in their belt

loops. Powerful worm medicines, harp dehorner, and young cowboys aspiring to be rodeo hands contributed also to outlawing cattle. Big pastures and widespread or no corral systems, along with rough techniques such as snubbing posts and choke ropes, increased the temperatures of the handled and the handlers.

In all those days of thick dust, deep tracks and thin residue, the only calves I ever saw weaned by mistake were in a calf marking exercise at Uncle Goat Whiskers' ranch. Two adjacent pastures of Hereford cows and baby calves were turned back at the same time late one evening. The calves collapsed in the bushes, shocked and bleeding from dehorning. Cows bawled all night; a few head jumped the fence. Took the cowboy up at the line camp several days to straighten the mess. As good a hand as he was, a few orphans (dogies) were left in each pasture.

My evidence of those hectic screwworm times burned in the bunkhouse fire. Shots of grim looking hombres decked in all the creases and shapes possible for the crown and brim of a Stetson, plus pictures of men on stout horses, manila ropes tied hard and fast to the saddlehorns and threaded through a neck rope, turned to ashes. Big losses for those of us who can never be cured of the smell of burned hair at

branding, or the thrill of trailing a hollow horn through the thickets and ledge rocks to capture her in the end.

Hard to understand cows being hard to pair and so easy to wean from the calves. Working off the calved heifers from the trap, we are careful that the mother claims her baby before moving her. Last week, one cow jumped back in the trap and left her calf in an adjacent pasture. We found her on the far side of the trap, eating a big leaf of prickly pear as contented as the Dairyman's Institute's advertisement in a Wisconsin farm journal.

Once driven from the cactus, she made a straight line to the pasture gate. Inside, she trotted right to her calf. A few fibers of green prickly pear dropping from her mouth proved she loved eating thick-leaved pear pads better than nursing her 60-pound newborn calf. Was a bit puzzling she'd jump the fence from a pasture covered in prickly pear to go back to a particular cactus. Must be some ingredient in prickly pear mighty special to cause that much exertion.

After I made sufficient gain last fall to winter eating ice cream at Baskin Robbins, I lost touch with the ice cream parlor crowd. However, in the summer, the mothers padding around at Baskin's wearing seersucker short suits tailored like cup towels made cursory roll calls herding the kids back to the cars. Every once in awhile, one of the

older models would throw up her head right quick just like an old humpy cow acts before she bolts from the herd. Made me think of the Big Depression. Kids learned plenty fast to be in the back seat of the car before the circus ended, or the rodeo was over.

Good thing cattle have changed. Sure bet the old guard of hombres such as myself would have stayed the same. I wish film existed of those long-ago works. Might make me thankful the only reason one jumps the fence nowadays is to eat prickly pear.